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Historiography of Medieval Peasants: From a Nameless Mass to a Thriving Community

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HISTORIOGRAPHY OF MEDIEVAL PEASANTS: FROM A NAMELESS MASS TO A THRIVING COMMUNITY

By Mallory Pratt

The conception of medieval peasants in popular consciousness has been of an anonymous mass of people, pinched by hunger and oppressed by the aristocracy for whom it labored. In the occasional mention of them in scholarship, illiterate peasants existed in rags, slaving for the lord of the land to which they were bound. Popular, if satirical, depictions such as *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* reflect that idea. Scholarly depictions of medieval manorial peasants did little to relieve that conception or allocate to them a measure of academic attention until the mid-twentieth century.

The twentieth century was a period of transition in general historiography. According to Georg G. Iggers, traditional historiography of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was concerned with the elites of politics and society while "the new forms of social science-oriented history emphasized social structures and processes of social change,"[1] taking a bottom-up approach and including formerly marginalized groups. The twentieth century ushered in a movement of inclusion of fringe social groups. Until the mid-twentieth century, medieval historians focused their energies on surveys of the Middle Ages, dealing specifically with foreign invasions, development of the papacy, and the creation of feudalism. The study of manorialism, especially the personality of the people on whom the manorial system rested, was virtually absent. Scholarship of the thirties and forties broadened in scope and included explications of the manorial system as well as studies of race, class, and gender. Scholars such as Marc Bloch delved into the intricacies of the manorial system as distinguished from feudalism and built upon the facts provided by earlier scholars, such as H. W. C. Davis and Carl Stephenson. Scholars became more interested in social histories and the people behind the classes and generalizations.

The closely intertwined feudal and manorial systems served as the political and economic foundations of the medieval period. The feudal system was dependent upon the manorial system, though the lifespan of the manorial system exceeded that of the feudal system. The feudal system was a product of the ninth and tenth centuries, especially the disturbance of the invasions of Vikings from the North, Magyars from the East, and the Saracens from the South. The manorial system both preceded and succeeded feudalism: manorialism was "an arrangement which was much older than vassalage and which was for a long time to survive it."[2] Although the concept of a weaker man seeking the

[1] Georg G. Iggers, *Introduction to Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: New England University Press, 1997), 3.

[2] Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961), 241.

economic protection of a stronger man—a concept foundational in both systems—was not a new concept in the medieval period, the turmoil of invasion and failing social structures reinforced the idea and brought it to prominence as a method of both economic and physical security. According to Marc Bloch, after the fall of the Roman Empire in the mid-fifth century and in the Merovingian society of the sixth century, "Neither the State nor the family any longer provided adequate protection. Everywhere, the weak man felt the need to be sheltered by someone more powerful."[3] The systems were symbiotic because they functioned simultaneously and because, at a basic level, they resembled each other. Both systems involved the transference of authority over a man from himself to a more powerful man; the use of land as a type of currency, with which men transferred authority; the exaction of a certain type of homage or due; and a developed hierarchy, resulting from the transference of authority. A crucial difference between the two social structures was the purpose of their existence. Feudalism was a political and social organization while manorialism existed for economic purposes. Feudalism concerned the aristocracy and gentry while manorialism concerned the peasantry, a mass of people who functioned around their respective manor houses rather than as a complete social unit.[4]

The Middle Ages adopted preexisting, though rudimentary, hierarchical organizations and vassalage traditions and polished them, creating a more extensive network of contracts and subcontracts between lords, tenants-in-chief, and subtenants. According to H. W. C. Davis, the system of vassalage and patronage existed cross-culturally and cross-temporally in traditions such as the *comitatus* of the Germanic warlords and the *antrusions* of the Merovingian kings. These bands functioned as the military force and the protection of the ruling chieftain. In the eighth and ninth centuries, particularly under the Carolingians, monarchs began systematically granting these bands of men land to reward them and to further bind them to the monarch's service. In exchange for land—first called *beneficium*, reflecting classical tradition, and renamed "fiefs" during the ninth century—and protection, the *vassi* rendered military service and upheld the honor of their leader.[5] Although the vassals were already participants in the primitive war band in early feudalism, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the men outside the feudal system began voluntarily submitting their services and swearing an oath of fealty to a lord in exchange for land and protection. This was the crux of the feudal organization, for "it is on obtaining specialized service, essentially military, by granting support in land (known as fee or fief) that the characterization of feudalism and feudal societies

[3] Bloch, 148; Philip Van Ness Myers, *The Middle Ages* (Boston, MA: Ginn and Company Proprietors, 1885), 174.

[4] Carl Stephenson, *A Brief Survey of Mediaeval Europe* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1941), 151, 158; Myers, 162, 166; H. W. C. Davis, *Medieval Europe* (London: Oxford, University Press, 1911), 67.

[5] Davis, 73-74; Myers, 166, 168.

hinges."[6] Fiefs also arose through the transference of *allodial* lands, or freehold tenures, which the proprietor held absolutely, to a more powerful lord. The lord then released that land back to the very same man as a tenure or fief. There was an advantage for both the powerful and the weak in joining forces, and often the same man was both lord over one and vassal to another, with the exception of the English feudal system, which fueled the complex web of feudal relationships. Philip Myers wrote, "Each vassal became a virtual sovereign in his own domain," and the monarch or lord had a preexisting force of military men whenever he needed it, as well as court retainers, because his vassals "regularly owed suit to the lord's court."[7]

There is a difficulty inherent in an exploration of the manorial system because the reality of the system varied from region to region. For example, manorialism was a more recent development on the British Isles than in the Frankish kingdom, so the customs and regulations governing each varied. According to Philip Myers, "[The serfs'] status varied greatly from country to country and from period to period. Consequently, it is impossible to give any general account of the class which can be regarded as a true picture of their actual condition as a body at any given time."[8] There are, however, basic structures of manorialism that existed in some combination throughout the medieval period and across Europe, facilitating a discussion of the system. Manors or great estates subdivided amongst free tenants or *servi*, who were bound to the land, existed in the Classical period as expansive *latifundiae*.[9] A significant characteristic of medieval manorialism was the control of the estate by the very vassals participating in the feudal system. The estates were either the land that the lord had granted to the vassal upon the ceremonial oath of fealty or the land that was formerly an *allodial* landholding. In turn, some of the sub-tenants of the manorial lord had once been freeholders of *allodial* land.

A manor was an "economic enterprise," and "first and foremost an estate," a part of a system which flourished "on all sides because under it, the mass of the people found the possibility of livelihood."[10] It had three basic components: the lord's demesne, which the free and unfree tenants farmed; the 30-acre plots of the tenant farmers, which occasionally coincided with a village; and the strips of land farmed by the serfs bound to the land. The basic distinction in manorial tenants was free vs. unfree. However, within those basic distinctions there were gradations of servitude, and the titles of those categories varied from century to century and from region to region. For example, in Britain, the term *villeins*

[6] Sally Harvey, "The Knight and the Knight's Fee in England," in *Peasants, Knights and Heretics: Studies in Medieval English Social History*, ed. R. H. Hilton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 133.

[7] Myers, 164, 166; Stephenson, 142.

[8] Myers, 171.

[9] Stephenson, 155; Bloch, 243.

[10] Bloch, 241, 250; Stephenson, 151.

existed throughout the medieval period. Initially, in the *Domesday Book*, it delineated free tenants, but, by the thirteenth century, "the villein slipped down into the category of the unfree."[11] The Codex Justinianus, a tripartite law code compiled by the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century, used the term *coloni* to delineate peasants bound to the land. "He shall be attached to the lord of the land so that he may not be able to depart without suffering penalties," the law code says, adding that coloni are not to leave "those places, the fruits of which support them."[12] *Serfs* was a fairly consistent term used on the Continent to delineate the unfree peasants. Often, the free tenants formerly had *allodial* land, which they submitted to the manorial lord, who rented their same land back to them as a tenement. The free tenants typically farmed about twenty-seven acres, farming their own plot for their sustenance as well as the lord's demesne for "manorial income." The serfs were bound to the land and farmed small strips of land averaging eighteen acres. While the free tenants were able to reserve and sell some of their excess produce, the serfs farmed for the lord alone and received no wages, a situation binding them to the land. The *Domesday Book* preserved extensive records of manorial divisions as well as the land tenanted and worked by specific people. Although the farming of the manorial estate was a communal endeavor, the inhabitants knew their specific plot, and so did the steward and reeve, who would have collected rent from the peasants. A record of Hecham village in the *Domesday Book*, recorded in 1086, shortly after the Norman conquest of England, says "Peter de Valence holds in domain Hecham, which Haldane a freeman held in the time of King Edward, as a manor, and as 5 hides. There have always been 2 ploughs in the demesne, 4 ploughs of the men." This demonstrates the detailed records that helped make manorialism a widespread and successful system.[13] "Virtually every peasant was also obliged to perform service, or *corvée*," which could manifest in anything from laboring the lord's land certain days in the year to repairing infrastructure such as roads and buildings on the manorial estate. Occasionally, a village consisted of the property of just one manor, but the actualities of the system were far from clear cut and systematic. The tenants of each lord existed in a sort of community in which they often worked together in a communal system and shared plow animals.[14]

[11] Gies, Francis, and Joseph Gies. *Life in a Medieval Village* (New York: Harper and Row, 1990), 68.

[12] "Codex Justinianus: Coloni Bound to the Soil, c. 530 [XI.51.i]," from P. Krueger, ed. *Codex Justinianus* (Berlin, 1877), 989.

[13] "Domesday Book: Hecham, 1086," trans. J. H. Robinson, *Internet History Sourcebook* (accessed November 16, 2012).

[14] The several fields of cultivation left to the peasants were often set up in an open-field with a two- or three-field system that allowed for crop rotation and resuscitation of the soil. In a two-field system, one field lay fallow while the other was divided into halves, one half for autumn crops and one half for spring crops. In a three-field system, one field lay fallow, one field was planted with winter crops, and the third held spring crops. The peasants had certain strips of land in each field that

As the manor was economic in nature, it required precise administration for success. The significant manorial positions were the steward, the reeve, and the hayward. The steward was the *major domus*, or man in charge of the lord's home, particularly while the lord was away. A thirteenth-century document on manorial administration said, "The steward of lands ought to be prudent and faithful and profitable, and he ought to know the law of the realm, to protect his lord's business and to instruct and give assurance to the bailiffs who are beneath him in their difficulties." The steward meticulously managed the affairs of the estate and delegated responsibilities to his subordinates. The reeve presided over the actual production and practical administration of peasant labor. He "must render account for everything," and all the tenants, both free and unfree, answered to him. The hayward, who was responsible to the reeve, administered agricultural production. The manor house had a tenuous existence and every component was necessary for its success, upon which depended the lord as well as the lives of the peasantry who worked his land.[15]

Although the manorial organization existed long before feudalism and outlasted the younger system, medieval historians did not turn their attention to discussing the manorial system and its participants until the twentieth century. While historians had largely moved away from Petrarch's damaging title of "The Dark Ages" and had turned their attention to marginalized groups, they had yet to include the manorial peasants. Peasants were a negligible part of society, and the nobility, foreign invaders, papacy, and Carolingian Renaissance consumed the majority of the texts. The latter half of the twentieth century saw an increase in academic interest in the life of the medieval peasant in the manorial system and the free towns. Monographs appeared on certain elements of medieval society, including manors and peasant communities. The shift in focus is apparent in a cursory glance at the title of academic works about the Middle Ages. *The Middle Ages*, *Medieval Europe*, *Feudal Society*, and *A Brief Survey of Medieval Europe* were published between 1885 and 1941 while *Life in a Medieval Village* and *Peasant Fires* are products of post-1960 academia. Historical academia had already broadened its scope and embraced sociology, but that did not flourish until the mid-twentieth century. Scholars at the beginning of the century were just turning their attention towards manorial peasants, and their initial research was limited and general.

The writings of Karl Marx were extremely influential on foundational philosophies and, by extension, many other disciplines, including history. The limited and negative view of medieval peasants was due in part to the writings

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they cultivated. According to Frances and Joseph Gies, "The strips of plowed land were held individually, and unequally. A few villagers held many strips, most held a few, some had none." Many of the manorial records still in existence deal with the parceling out of land and the guarantee that each man farmed his own strips. Gies, 69, 133; Stephenson, 156, 158; Myers, 172.

[15] "Manorial Management and Organization, c. 1275," trans. Elizabeth Lamond, *Internet History Sourcebook* (accessed November 15, 2012).

of Marx, namely his *Kommunist Manifesto*, published in 1845. Marx depicted peasants, though not specifically medieval peasants, as a class oppressed under the heel of the upper classes through taxes and, more importantly, through labor, industrial and agricultural. Marx devoted his writings to economics, class struggle, and politics. The term "political economy" appears throughout his work, denoting the kinship between economy and politics. He decried the class system saying, "An oppressed class is the vital condition for every society founded on the antagonism of classes." According to Marx, it is under the dominance of the property-owners that "the worker [property-less] sinks to the level of a commodity and becomes indeed the most wretched of commodities." Marx predicted that society was on a straight track to political revolution, a climax he called a "brutal contradiction, the shock of body against body." Marxist theory was popular throughout the nineteenth century, leading to the conception of peasants as a ragged, ignorant, and potentially violent class, and still had bearings on the twentieth century, though some scholars began to challenge his theories.[16]

Philip Van Ness Myers published *The Middle Ages* in 1885, representing the initial move towards social history. He intended "that [his] sketch may not be a recital simply of outer circumstances, but a history of the real inner life of the European people." Myers praised the medieval period as crucial to both the existence of the Italian Renaissance and the modern period. He wrote, "Over all the regions covered by the barbarian inundation a new stratum of population was thrown down, a new soil formed that was capable of nourishing a better civilization than any the world had yet seen." Myers intended his history to be a social one, so he first examined the three influences conjoining in the Middle Ages—Teutonic, Classical, Christian—and then looked at specific cultural traits of each that had a hand in medieval culture, such as the Teutons' "veneration of womanhood" and "love of personal freedom."[17]

Despite Myers's good intentions, he included only two brief pages on the manorial system, which he treated as a subset of feudalism. He covered the predominant medieval topics and delved into the development of towns; however, manorialism receives little attention. He recognized that "the vassals, or fief holders, of various grades constituted only a very small portion, perhaps, five per cent or less, of the population of the countries where feudalism came to prevail." Yet, that admission did not induce him to dedicate any more time to the participants in the manorial system. His short depiction of the serfs is not a pleasant one. The "poor serf" existed under a "heavy yoke of servitude," and his "share was only just sufficient to keep the wolf of hunger from his door." The cursory glance given towards the peasants does not provide sufficient context

[16] Karl Marx, "The Coming Upheaval," in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 218-219. Marx, 70.

[17] Myers, 1, 4, 9, 10.

for his claim to be fully reliable. This sympathy for the supposed plight of serfs is a typical conception of pre-1960 scholars and smacks of Marxist influence. Nonetheless, Myers represents the early move toward thorough social research that examined every aspect of the lives of formerly ignored peoples, such as medieval tenants and serfs.[18]

H. C. W. Davis wrote a brief survey of medieval Europe titled *Medieval Europe*, published in 1911. The brevity of the account renders the section of feudalism short and the mention of manorialism nonexistent, with the exception of the mention of serfs as essentially the bottom rung of the feudalist system. Davis was a part of the *Annales School*, which "promoted a new form of history, replacing the study of leaders with the lives of ordinary people and replacing examination of politics, diplomacy, and wars with inquiries into climate, demography, agriculture, commerce, technology, transportation, and communication, as well as social groups and mentalities"—that is, *la longue durée*.[19] Despite this approach, Davis does not include the situation of the majority of the European population, the tenants and serfs upon whom feudalism ultimately rested.

Carl Stephenson reflected Myers in the generality of his *A Brief Survey of Medieval Europe*, published 60 years later in 1941, but he also included a discussion of manorialism in which he recognizes manorialism as the precursor of feudalism. Although the information is brief and basic, it is thorough, including the purpose of manorialism, the agricultural methods involved, the persons involved in estate administration, the taxes and obligations of the peasant, the relation of peasant to lord, and even a summary of the practicalities of peasant life. While Stephenson recognized that the peasant worked hard, he qualified that admission saying, "The fact that the entire feudal class was supported, directly or indirectly, by the peasants should not be taken to imply that in general the latter were cruelly treated."[20] Stephenson represents the transition in medieval scholarship, looking more closely at the manorial system and those on whose backs it rested.

Marc Bloch represents the *Annales School* of historical approach, which he founded in the early 1900s with Lucien Febvre. The theoretical approach emphasized attention to "the aspects of feeling and experience embedded in the collective mentalities that form the subject of historical anthropology" and "the stressing the relativity and multilayering of time."[21] Bloch wrote a monograph on feudalism titled *Feudal Society*, published in French in 1940 and in English in 1961. Although the book was about feudalism, Bloch recognized that the

[18] Myers, 170-173.

[19] Encyclopedia Britannica Online, s.v. "Annales school," http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/1364891/Annales-school (accessed November 12, 2012).

[20] Stephenson, 155.

[21] Iggers, 51, 53.

structures were inextricably linked with manorialism, and so he included a section titled "Ties of Dependence among the Lower Orders of Society," discussing manorial estates, lords, serfs, obligations, and select cases from the period.[22] Bloch's book could also be called a general survey in the sense that, in his detailed discussion of feudalism, Bloch included social, economic, political and military factors. A better term might be a "holistic" history of feudalism.

One strength of the book was Bloch's attempt to meet the Middle Ages in the past rather than impose modern terms or classifications upon the period. He referred directly to primary sources and extracted information. In the section of the book on "Modes of Feeling and Thought," Bloch bemoaned "a history more worthy of the name than the diffident speculations to which we are reduced but the paucity of our material would give space to the vicissitudes of the human organism."[23] More than reporting facts, Bloch wanted to explain the reason for those facts, to delve into the minds and hearts of the men causing those events.

A book in the spirit of Bloch's *Feudal Society* is *The Ties That Bind* by Barbara Hanawalt, published in 1986. The book is a significant monograph on the life of medieval peasant families in England. Her basic thesis is that, throughout the tumult of the Black Death and increased taxation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the traditional family remained stable. The structure and function of the family endured due to its flexibility as well as economic its necessity and traditional roles, which provided an identity for family members. Before stating the underlying intention of her work, Hanawalt first delineated what she was not trying to do—that is, falsely depict medieval peasants as either equivalent to modern folk or as "boorish, unsentimental, unsociable, gossipy creatures," such as other historians have done. The specificity of Hanawalt's book allowed her to delve deeply into nearly every aspect of peasant life, resulting in a vibrant but fair portrayal of the pleasures and difficulties of their lives. Hanawalt's book does not have a section on manorialism because she addressed the function of the familial unit, though she did write with the foundational assumption that the peasants were tenants of a lord. [24]

Frances and Joseph Gies in 1990 published *Life in a Medieval Village*, an extensive explication of manorial and village life in thirteenth-century Britain that focuses on a village called Elton in the East Midlands of England. Although they published the book for the general public rather than strictly the academic world, their work nevertheless reflects a stage in the transformation of medieval study. The Gies wrote with a foundational intimate attitude towards their subjects. "[In the village] they lived, there they labored, there they socialized, married, brewed and drank ale," the Gies write, indicating their intention to

[22] Bloch, 240.
[23] Ibid., 72.
[24] Barbara Hanawalt, *The Ties That Bind*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 3-4, 8.

depict a medieval village that bustles with the lives of its inhabitants. The village in the Gies' book is "the primary community to which its people belonged for all life's purposes…Together they formed an integrated whole, a permanent community organized for agricultural production." This communal crux of medieval peasant life serves as the foundation from which the Gies approach their writing.[25]

The Gies' book is about people, first and foremost; secondly, it is about how they formed new institutions and interacted with pre-existing structures such as the manor. Manorialism figures prominently in the book because manorial estates sometimes coincided with a village. The Gies distinguish between the town and the village, defining the town as based on a trade or craft and the village as something agriculturally based. Their work fully represents what Georg Iggers called "the postmodern critique of traditional scholarship," that scholarship which emerged in the later twentieth century, comprising "a broad historical approach that takes both cultural and institutional aspects into consideration."[26]

Peasant Fires: The Drummer of Niklashausen, a 1992 book written by Richard Wunderli, is an exception to the general departure from depicting peasants as downtrodden anonymous sufferers. Wunderli wrote with a postmodern emphasis on narrative and a Marxist emphasis on class oppression. The narrative, intentionally written for the general public rather than professional historians, focuses on Hans Behem as an avenue to discuss the greater folk culture of medieval Germany. The fictional Behem was a German peasant whose spiritual revelations led to violent uprisings of the peasant population in his region of Germany. Wunderli recreates Behem as a person and then recreates the social/spiritual/emotional mentalities of the medieval period, specifically focusing on the calendar of feasting and fasting days. There is a pronounced Marxist theory behind Wunderli's words: "Peasants the world over live and have lived a precarious existence. Indeed, [Marxist anthropologist] Eric Wolf tells us, they are 'peasants' because others with privilege and power in society have trapped them economically into an existence of work and poverty." He goes on to say that peasants were victims of the upper classes, who created the role of the peasant and forced him into it. It was through the brute violence of the manorial lord that rent was assuredly paid. The two things that suppressed the peasants were the upper classes and the market economy. Whatever they did, the peasants were on the losing end. Wunderli's scholarship is an eclectic combination of Marxist theory, emphasizing political and economic influences, and sociological and anthropological concerns of mentality and belief.

Gender, race, and class studies were part of the development of scholarship in the latter half of the twentieth century. Sally Smith's article "Women and

[25] Gies, 7.
[26] Iggers, 16.

Power in the Late Medieval English Village: A Reconsideration," which focused on the power wielded by the medieval peasant woman in daily life, exemplifies this element of historical approach. She confronted previous scholarship that narrowly defined gender roles in the medieval family, stating that "even a fairly cursory examination of the available evidence makes it clear that there is very little to support this notion of domestic confinement of women." Smith says that women participated in agriculture, typically depicted as man's work, and were evidently dominant in the household sphere. She then goes a step further: "If we man men's and women's activities, we can argue for asymmetrical spheres of exercise—women could do virtually everything that men could do, but the opposite did not apply." Smith attempted to uncover the reality of life for medieval peasant women and redefine narrow conceptions of their influence and importance. Her work is a compilation of postmodern critique and feminist theory.[27]

Historical scholarship in the last century has in some instances retained traditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but in others it has taken great strides towards a more flexible approach to time and causation as well as a more inclusive approach to people groups. The change has moved scholarship away from "macrohistorical and macrosocial processes" to focus on "culture in the broad sense of everyday life," essentially uniting multiple disciplines, such as anthropology and sociology, with historical study. Historical study in the twentieth century branched into several different tracks, all with a basic assumption that sociology, anthropology, and history are much closer relatives than previously accepted.

In medieval scholarship, this change has manifested in the type of books written as well as the content of the books. The entire twentieth century demonstrated an inclusion of social history, beginning with stilted inclusions of cultural information in general medieval histories and ending in focused attempts to capture the essence of the manorial peasants and the richness and hardship of the life they lived. Georg Iggers wrote in 1997, "History has again assumed a human face as new attention has been given to individuals, this time not to the high and mighty, but to the common folks."[28]

[27] Sally V. Smith, "Women and Power in the Late Medieval English Village: A Reconsideration," *Women's History Review* 16, no. 3 (July 2007): 312-313.

[28] Iggers, 14.